

20, Harriett Street,
ADELAIDE,
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11th August, 1982

Dear Blanche,

Nina forwarded your last letter to us as she was about to leave on her holidays and didn't think she would have time to write to you again. We have discussed some of your comments and the points you raise and have appreciated this opportunity for further consideration of the Teachings. I know that you've heard a lot from Nina on the subject of the development of understanding, so I don't want to repeat too much.

§ We sympathised with your comments about your life on your own and wish to develop higher levels of understanding of the Teachings which can really help us to come to terms with our lives and so live more easily and peacefully with ourselves. However, it seems to me, that the hardest part of the practice is learning to be honest and realistic about our tendencies and what is possible in this life. You mention that your aim is to gain 'Mastery'. It seems that we all start with ideas of becoming enlightened without really understanding how this is possible. It also seems that we start off by thinking we know quite a lot about life, that what we hear from the Buddha's teachings is common-sense that we know already. In fact, we can begin to find out more and more how little we really know at this moment. We are beginners and have to begin again and again. There is always another reality to be known as Nina has suggested. With more understanding it seems that we find out how much more ignorance there is in our lives than we ever considered possible before we began considering the teachings.

At first, this seemed very depressing to me. I thought I understood quite a lot and also thought it should be possible to reach stages of enlightenment fairly soon. However, when there are a few moments of awareness which are aware of the reality at this moment, there is nothing depressing. Instead of having fantasies about the end result one would like to experience, one begins to know more about one's life as it is. It's the development of this kind of knowledge which will lead us in the right direction towards higher levels of wisdom.

I admire your dedication and consideration of the Dhamma. I'm sorry that you are not well and that life is rather a struggle in this sense. I'm sure you are familiar with the many suttas the Buddha taught where he encouraged people to consider sickness, old age, death which are so inevitable, in order that they might develop wisdom without delay. He reminds us again and again that there's 'fire on our heads' and that we need to be aware of realities through 6 doors.

I'd just like to touch on a few of your comments which I find it helpful to consider. Firstly, I think one has to be clear as to what the aim really is in one's life. If one's aim is the development of calm only, it is different from the aim which Nina has been discussing with you of developing insight or vipassanā. I'm sure she has also discussed how calmness or samatha has concept as its object whereas insight has reality as its object. Only the latter can lead to the total eradication of defilements.

I understand that both calmness and insight can be (and have to be) developed in daily life with right understanding. In the case of calmness or samatha, as I'm sure you already know, one has to be clear about the object, about the nature of calmness and about how the object can calm the mind at that moment. For example, if one just concentrates on breath without understanding how breath can calm the mind, one will be concentrating with attachment and the idea that self can control the mind at that moment.

You suggest that perhaps there's an important part of the Teachings that we are missing and I appreciate your concern to help Nina. However, Nina also encourages the development of all kinds of wholesomeness whether its at the level of sila or of calmness at this moment. You suggest that what is important is in the results from the state of calm and the stilling of the citta. However, one can have many seemingly wonderful experiences from many practices which are taught today. But, again, is it really calm? Should the purpose be to still the mind? It sounds like we'd be better off if we could always select or control our life in some way. However, the essence of the Buddha's teachings is that the realities which appear now arise by conditions and are beyond control. If there is restlessness or agitation at this moment or seeing or hearing, it's arisen already. What is better, to know it as it is - a conditioned reality which is not self, or to try and change it, to still it perhaps, with the wrong idea of self in control?

I mention this example because in your letter you continue to suggest that comments made about a code of ethics sound no different to you from any 'moral religious code'. I'd just like to suggest that in a sense you are right. It can sound like morality encouraged in other teachings. But, it depends on our understanding when we read or hear or consider. If there is the beginning of understanding which understands that it's not self who keeps sila and that sila with understanding is quite different from sila without understanding, one will also see that the Buddha wasn't making rules but was encouraging the development of understanding which will know more clearly what is wholesome and what isn't. This is the way that sila and other kinds of wholesomeness can be perfected, with understanding of different realities at different moments, all of which are uncontrollable or not-self.

In one of your quotes from Maha Bua, it's suggested that 'One's critical view of all the external Sabhava Dhamma of forms, sounds, smells tastes and tactile objects throughout the universe will lose its significance due to the Parinā that gradually cuts it off.' You continue to discuss other similar points. I'd like to emphasise that it is not 'One' or 'self' who watches, observes or recognises. If there are conditions for awareness to arise, awareness is aware of the reality which appears at this moment. The aim shouldn't be to cut-off certain realities. Even the arahat experiences realities through six doorways and understands the value of awareness of these realities. You say that you also notice the activities of the Khandha and that you reason about them. Is this not thinking? Thinking can reason about anything, but it's not the same as direct understanding of the reality of thinking as thinking, not self at that moment. It's different from the concepts reasoned about. It sounds as if you lack some confidence in the power of awareness when you ask how one can know citta by only knowing realities through the six doors. Actually, your words are 'watching and recognizing realities....' Watching and recognizing are not the same as direct awareness. If one understands more

- first of all in theory - about the nature of realities, as Nina has discussed so much with you, then awareness can begin to be aware, little by little. In the beginning, there's bound to be a lot of doubt and questioning and any awareness is bound to be so brief and 'blurry', but don't give up! It really has to be the way to understand life better, to accept it more as it is already conditioned, rather than always trying to change it or wish it were something else. It's the way to understand how it's like this for everyone also, and so we can have more metta and compassion and help others better.

So I'd like to just suggest that one doesn't have to stop rushing in one's life, one doesn't have to change one's situation. What's important is the understanding of all kinds of wholesome-ness, and in particular the understanding of insight which can gradually help one live more happily and easily with out life as it is.

With best wishes

Jonathan Sarna (Abbott)

are on your own and would find it helpful to listen
types of discussion will know begin or the subject was
to discuss my questions, please let us know and
my to help